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ABSTRACT

The 3-year Wisconsin Action Research Project was designed to bring together teams of practitioners from general and special education and provide them with training and support to conduct action research studies. This report describes the first pilot year of the project. First-year action studies attempted to address the following three outcomes: effective practices with students having exceptional educational needs; collaboration among preservice and inservice educators; and alignment of special education reforms with reforms in general education. The project's overall efforts have involved the development of an action research training curriculum delivered to five teams of teachers and the provision of technical support to each team by a university/college faculty member. The five teams include both rural and suburban early childhood education teams examining successful transitions from an early childhood special needs program to an inclusive kindergarten; a suburban elementary team evaluating effectiveness of general and special educators teaming to teach language arts; an urban elementary team examining the realistic aspects of inclusion and team teaching; and an urban secondary team examining the efficacy of a content mastery program. (Contains 15 references.) (DB)

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Running head: LESSONS LEARNED

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Lessons Learned From Teachers' Action Research: Implications for K-12 settings and preservice/inservice teacher preparation

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Abstract

The term action research describes a method of inquiry undertaken by classroom teachers for the purpose of improving their own practices. The Wisconsin Action Research Project brought together teams of practitioners from general and special education and provided them with training and support to conduct action research studies. While the studies varied in focus, they all attempted to address the following outcomes: to increase our knowledge about effective practices with students having exceptional educational needs; to promote collaboration among preservice and inservice educators; and to promote the alignment of special education reforms with reforms in general education.

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Background

The activities detailed in this paper represent the first year (1994-1995) of a three year Wisconsin Action Research Project. This collaborative project was designed by education faculty from three state universities and one private college in cooperation with personnel from four regional cooperative education service agencies (CESA's).

The term action research, also known as teacher research, is used throughout this document to describe a method of inquiry undertaken by classroom teachers for the purpose of reflecting upon and improving their own practices. This approach to research is becoming recognized as a valid methodology and is viewed by many as an important catalyst for facilitating educational reforms.

The Wisconsin Action Research Project was generated following a strategic planning session undertaken by members of Wisconsin's Professional Development Consortium/Teacher Education Division (PDC/TED) organization. As a result of this planning, three major initiatives were identified to help guide future activities of the organization. The first initiative focused on increasing collaboration among professionals in general and special education; across K-12 settings and institutions of higher education. The second initiative focuses on promoting research which would add to our knowledge base of effective practices for students with exceptional educational needs. The final initiative is to establish working networks among professional organizations representing general and special education.

The activities resulting from the Wisconsin Action Research Project attempt to address each of these initiatives as well as promote the alignment of special education initiatives with general education reforms. This project also attempts to empower teachers by developing professionals who can engage in creative problem-solving and research-based decision making.

Introduction to the Issues

Teachers in the United States have long been treated as teachers: They have had responsibility for the students as well as for the learning by the students in their charge. The content of instruction as well as methods for delivering instruction have often been imposed on teachers by those from outside the particular school setting (i.e., community dictates, philosophies promulgated from universities, etc.). Teacher concerns were often not deemed important by all of the outside communities and teachers were traditionally not exposed to ways of discovering answers to situations that troubled them.

Following the establishment of the specialization of special education in the United States, general education teachers also had rules for special education students imposed upon them with very minimal input into the conversation regarding students enrolled in special education.

When P.L. 94-142 was reauthorized and renamed in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, however, the concept of having students with disabilities placed in general education classrooms (called inclusion) became widespread. This concept has necessitated both consultation and collaboration between general education and special education practitioners. As a result, teachers from both fields have found that they often had more questions than they did answers.

A way of discovering new answers for the new situations arising from education reform movements has begun in the United States; this way is subsumed under the term "teacher action research."

Teacher Action Research

Action research, state Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) is defined as "systematic, intentional inquiry carried out by teachers..." (p. 189). Dicker (1990), after having conducted her own action research defined this type of research as "a form of self-reflective inquiry that can be utilized by teachers in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations in which these practices are carried out" (p. 13). Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1990) traced two paradigms which previously held sway in research on teaching: student achievement as "effect" and teacher behavior as "cause" and; qualitative or ecological studies.

In both of these paradigms, university personnel have been the researchers; classroom teachers have frequently been unheard. As Barnes cogently observed (1992), teachers cannot assume the detached role that university researchers often do. Classroom teachers are in the classroom, are accountable for what happens in the classroom, are involved with what is happening in the classroom, and must, in fact, make choices make choices based on what is happening in the classroom. It is, ironically, through doing action research in the classroom that the teacher becomes truly empowered: answers to questions about both curriculum and instruction emerge from the research that the classroom teacher is conducting (Stenhouse as cited in Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985).

Practical inquiry, states Richardson (1994), often leads to a change in the practices of teachers. Narratives or teacher "stories" as a form of qualitative research are often rich in data and meaning (Richardson, 1994; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993; Clandinin, 1992). Practical inquiry is intended to find answers for specific contexts: those that the teachers are facing; practical inquiry is not intended to "provide *the* [emphasis original] answer to a problem" (Richardson, 1994, p. 7).

A topic that has given rise to a myriad of questions needing answers is that of inclusion. How to best deliver instruction to students with special needs and where to deliver that instruction have been topics generating much debate both in general and special education. That this is a topic for research of all kinds--including teacher action research was underscored by Keogh (1994), who has stated that children cannot wait for the "conclusive and incontrovertible evidence [arising from empirical findings] given the turtle-like pace of research and the caution of most researchers to draw generalizations from their research" (p. 62).

Inclusion

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (P.L. 101-476), originally the Education for All Handicapped Children Act--Public Law 94-142, stipulates that children with disabilities be provided a free appropriate public education and further "requires school districts to educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment" (Osborne & Dimattia, 1994, p. 6). As McCarthy (1994) has explained, this means that children with disabilities should be placed in general education classes for instruction; "only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular [sic] classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily" can children with disabilities be placed in a special class or facility (p. 1).

Because general and special education teachers often possess different professional knowledge structures for interpreting classroom happenings as well as for planning instruction (Blanton, Blanton, & Cross, 1994), collaboration by all teachers--both from general and special education backgrounds--is crucial to ensure that all types of knowledge are put together to work for the success of each child.

Collaboration was identified as a factor leading to success in implementing inclusion, discovered several empirical studies (Evans, Harris, Adeigbola, Houston, & Argott, 1993; Lipsky & Garner, 1994). Although collaboration between university researchers and classroom teachers has been a long established practice, it has been only

recently that university researchers have gained knowledge from the process itself (Bickel & Hattrup, 1995; Pugach & Johnson, 1990) The knowledge derived when teachers ask and answer questions and the knowledge derived from university researchers must be viewed equitably for meaningful research to take place and for change to occur. Indeed, Pugach and Johnson (1990) state that classroom teachers who are involved in conducting action research have a vested interest in their discoveries and are therefore more likely to be committed to making changes they discover need to be made.

The three themes of collaboration, action research, and inclusion are woven throughout the Wisconsin Action Research Project.

Overview of the Project

A Three Year Plan

The Wisconsin Action Research Project was designed as a three year study. The first year of the project was designed to pilot a variety of activities to deliver relevant knowledge and skills associated with the use of action research methods. For example, in the first year of the project, a draft of a training curriculum was designed, delivered, and evaluated. During this first year, each of the five teams of teachers, with the technical support of a university/college faculty member in education, developed and conducted an action research study. It is this first year "pilot" which will be detailed in the following pages.

The second year of this project will be used to refine the curriculum and delivery format as well as to provide the opportunity and support for the first cadre of teachers to complete a final report of their research. Networking activities will also be expanded and recruitment of a second cadre of teacher-researchers will begin. This second team of teachers will receive training in action research and the first cadre of teachers will be used to provide technical assistance to the second team, under the direction of university/college faculty.

Based on an expanded evaluation of the training curriculum and an assessment of the status of the intended outcomes, the project will be further revised prior to year three activities. During this final year of the project, a third cadre of teachers will receive training and technical support to enable them to develop and implement an action research study. By year three, it is hoped that this project has extended activities throughout the state with expanded representation from local cooperative educational service agencies personnel and university faculty in education representing both special and general education.

Year One Activities

As previously stated, the first year of the study was intended to serve as a pilot to afford the project directors the opportunity to develop and refine relevant processes for delivering the knowledge and skills necessary for teachers to conduct an action research study. The fiscal resources provided by the grant supported a wide array of activities, including the reimbursement for substitute teachers to release the teacher-researchers to participate in the initial training workshop as well as team planning meetings scheduled throughout the first year of the project. The project also allowed project directors to hire a consultant with the expertise to design and deliver the workshop on action research.

The Action Research Training Curriculum

Early in the first year of this project, five teams of teachers were recruited to participate in the pilot phase of this project. During the first year, the teachers (representing general and special education) and university/college faculty (comprising what would become the technical support staff) took part in a two-day workshop. This workshop provided participants with the basic knowledge and skills necessary to design and implement an action research study. This workshop was led by Linda Tiezzi from the University of Wisconsin--Milwaukee, who has extensive training and experience with action research methodology.

Perhaps the best way to capture the "essence" of the climate created by the workshop leader is to use a quote by Joseph Schwab, "Human learning is a communal enterprise..." (SOURCE NEEDED). As a result of engaging in a variety of directed readings and reflections, participants came together, within and across their research teams, to discuss their thoughts and emerging knowledge relevant to the area of teacher directed research.

As a result of the activities provided by the consultant, participants not only gained a foundation of awareness and emerging knowledge in the area of action research, but they also began the process of establishing strong collegial attachments within their teams.

While it is not possible to detail the entire scope of the workshop curriculum, a brief overview will hopefully provide the reader with a flavor of the knowledge and skills presented. The content of the workshop focused on the following areas: awareness about the value of community learning; the role of intrigue and inquiry in the teaching-learning process; what it means to be a teacher-researcher; action research as a method for reflecting upon and validating practices; strategies for conducting action research (how to get started

using what you know); action research as a tool for empowerment; an analytical framework for guiding action research; an overview of quantitative and qualitative research paradigms; and action research as a disciplined field of inquiry (insider versus outsider perspective).

The Role of Technical Support

During this workshop, and throughout the first year of the study, each teacher-researcher team was provided with technical support from a university/college faculty member. Meetings between the teachers and support personnel were often conducted during the school day by releasing the teacher-researchers from their teaching duties due to reimbursement to the schools for hiring substitute teachers. This allowed teachers to work for one-half or a whole day to develop and refine their study with the facilitation of a university/college faculty member.

The technical support personnel provided a variety of services for their teacher-research teams. They helped teams focus their field of inquiry, guided them toward topics consistent with the anticipated project outcomes (i.e., to increase the knowledge base about effective practices with students having exceptional educational needs), and encouraged ongoing reflections by the teachers.

During this first year, the members of the steering committee also met as a group to discuss the challenges they were facing as they worked with their teams. These meetings allowed the technical support staff to bring a degree of consistency to the processes used with the teacher-research teams as well as to share knowledge and skills to increase the effectiveness of the teams.

Proposals for Teacher Research

The research proposals represented collaborative efforts between general and special educators with "technical support" from university faculty. Each team defined a project which is intended to improve the effectiveness of educational services for students with exceptional educational needs. It is expected that these studies will have implications for practice for both inservice and preservice teacher education.

In choosing the teacher-researcher teams, the project directors sought out a range of age groups and settings. Thus, there were two early childhood teams, one from a rural district and one from a suburban community; one team from a large from an urban elementary school; one team from two high schools in a small urban district; and one elementary school team from a suburban district.

The suburban early childhood education team is documenting the processes being used to facilitate successful transitions for children moving from the early childhood exceptional educational needs program to an inclusive kindergarten. It is intended that a model for facilitating future transitions be an outcome of this documentation, thereby enabling other teachers--both special and general education teachers--to use this model to guide those future teachers' effective transition activities.

The early childhood education team from the rural district is attempting to identify the factors that will make transition from an early childhood education program to an inclusive kindergarten class successful. As a way to evaluate these factors, this team is conducting a single case study of a student with multiple needs. A related topic for study are factors which will facilitate collaboration.

The suburban elementary team has sought to create a model for a research study that will seek to gather both qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate the effectiveness of general and special educators teaming to teach language arts. The model, which will document "best practices" for team teaching, will also measure the attitudes of students, teachers, and parents toward the team teaching over a longer period of time than the length of this pilot study.

The realistic aspects of inclusion and team teaching will be studied by the urban elementary team. Strategies used when facing the challenges of team teaching will be identified. The general and special education teachers are keeping journals of their experience.

The efficacy of a content mastery program is the focus of the study being undertaken by a team of special educators from two high schools located in a small urban district. Students in this program are expected to become self-advocates in this program. Student surveys, reviews of student records, interviews with general and special education teachers, and daily logs kept by the team will be used to collect data in this project.

As a review of these proposals indicate, all are designed to increase our knowledge about effective practices with students having exceptional educational needs as well as to promote collaboration among general and special educators. Along the way, there are lessons we have learned; additionally, there are lessons yet to be learned.

Lessons Learned....So Far

Although there was a variety of anticipated outcomes of this study, all of them have not yet been realized because this is a "work in progress." One unanticipated outcome, or lesson learned, which has been realized, however, is the need to more fully develop the role that the technical support personnel should play during the development of the research proposal and throughout the process of collecting data.

During the joint meetings held among the technical support staff, one issue was addressed repeatedly: the need to clarify the role played by personnel providing technical support. It appeared that the singular dilemma faced by each member centered around the question of how much direction should be provided to the teams. Support personnel were concerned they would be too directive and, as a result, have too much influence upon the topic and/or processes used by the teacher-researchers. Conversely, the teacher-researchers were requesting more direction from their technical support person.

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